

January 22, 2009

EXHIBIT 6  
DATE 1/22/09  
# 2

To: Joint Appropriations Subcommittee for Health and Human Services

Members: Chair, Rep. Teresa Henry; Vice-Chair, Sen. Dave Lewis; Rep. Penny Morgan; Rep. Carolyn Pease-Lopez; Rep. Don Roberts; Sen. John Esp, Sen. Trudi Schmidt, Sen. Dave Wanzenried

From: Julia M. Saylor, 554 3<sup>rd</sup> St., Helena, MT 59601 (406)461-6233 jmsay1@gmail.com

Re: Testimony respectfully submitted, Jan. 22, 2009 in support of the Montana Telecommunications Access Program

Chair Henry and members of this subcommittee, thank you for allowing me a few minutes of your time here today.

For the record, my name is Julia M. Saylor. I am appearing today in an individual capacity and not as a state employee nor as a member of the MTAP Board. I am here, on my own time, to share some of the challenges I experience as a hearing impaired person, and how MTAP has helped me.

Hearing impairment is exceedingly complex and individual, presenting varying degrees of challenge to people as they lead their lives. Medically, my classification falls in the range of severe hearing impairment – unlike many people, I can still “hear” higher frequencies, but I have extremely poor speech discrimination. Translating to numbers, in a sound proof booth, I test as being able to discriminate speech at the level of around 23 percent. So, in a group of 10 words, I will accurately discriminate two – three of them. In the real world of our everyday lives, so many factors affect what I can and cannot discriminate: the proximity of the speaker, affecting not only sound but lip reading capabilities; extraneous noise; several people talking at once; the frequency of the speaker’s voice (lower ones are deadly for me); how well he/she articulates consonants, etc. The reality of what happens, then, is my brain takes the word or words my ears have discriminated and flips through a rolodex file of words until it can land on the ones that provide comprehension/meaning to what the speaker is saying. The process is both accurate at times, and inaccurate, depending again on multiple factors. It is always exhausting and frequently frustrating. And, I am simply unable to use a regular telephone, resulting in a host of communication challenges related to personal safety, working, socialization, business, and everyday living.

I did not grow up struggling to hear – I grew up loving speech and written words, I participated in music, became an English teacher and a librarian and it was not until approximately fifteen years ago that I began to have trouble hearing my students, in particular. As my condition worsened, I visited doctors and audiologists and read as much as possible to figure out what was happening and why and what I could do about it. It is thought that I have a quite common genetic defect that at a certain point in time causes the cilia the inner ears (a key part of our ability to discriminate speech) to die. I accepted hearing aids as routine, and for many years I remained in my chosen profession of teaching and was able to function fairly normally, including using a regular telephone.

#6

In the last several years, the condition deteriorated to such an uncomfortable level that I retired from the classroom, began new employment that did not require the level of hearing that teaching did and started hunting for a better and better telephone for both personal and work use. About four years ago, an audiologist suggested I contact MTAP for telephone assistance. I had spent so many years trying to get by and not make a big deal of the fact that I could not hear ... I hated feeling marginalized. I admit that it was unsettling to walk into an office that immediately focuses on the person and her problem. I would have preferred to run away at first, but they surrounded me! They asked me what struggles I was having with phone use, especially in the workplace. They listened. They did not feel sorry for me; they focused on solutions. And, I did not feel out of place or "abnormal" because I could not hear. I felt understood. They made suggestions, let me try out a variety of telephone solutions for my condition at that time, and then loaned an amazing telephone to me for use at work. Besides the support of MTAP, I had a supportive supervisor and colleagues. And, once again, I was able to be a complete part of the workforce. They continued to monitor how I was doing; they were always happy to hear from me, and I realized that once a relationship begins with the MTAP staff, it is an ongoing one.

More serious deterioration occurred and continues to this day. A new job opportunity came along, recently, that would allow me to once again make use of my education world background and skills. I applied for the job, got it, and undaunted by my condition, the MTAP staff provided many hours of support and assistance so that I now successfully communicate in my new work place with a two-line CapTel captioning phone – one that uses the Hamilton Relay system. With the two line installation, all calls, incoming and outgoing are automatically captioned. No one has to dial a relay number first. It took more than one house call from MTAP staff to make the system work and keep it working, but with perseverance and, again with the support of colleagues and supervisor, it works well, and I remain an enthusiastic member of the workforce. I need and want to work outside of my home; to be able to use a telephone allows me to do so.

Technology in this area is changing daily with wireless capabilities. MTAP stays on top of it all. When Hamilton Relay and CapTel teamed up to offer an internet site that would allow captioning via the internet using any phone that was near a computer, Connie Phelps emailed me the news. As soon as that site went online, I logged on and for the last year am able to use my cell phone to make calls – this time reading the other party's words on my computer screen. This set-up is the way I use a telephone at home. Through MTAP, I have tried out a variety of assistive listening devices to see what helps me hear speakers in groups or other special settings. These devices can range in price from just a few dollars to two – three thousand dollars. MTAP serves as a valuable, non-commercial, clearing house for information about devices and where technology is headed. There are many aspects of living that hearing impairment does close off to me: concerts, films in theaters, most public presentations, large group activities. Despite that reality, technology, including new hearing aid technology, promotes inclusion instead of isolation. (I cannot imagine life without email and cell phone texting communication!) I am so honored to offer public appreciation to MTAP for their part in helping me continue to live a contributing, engaged, productive, and active life.

Thank you very much for your time and thoughtful consideration here today. I urge you to support the budget for the Montana Telecommunications Access Program.